

## Planning Department Memorandum

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**TO:** Honorable Mayor and Members of the Town Council

**FROM:** Jeff Triezenberg, AICP, GISP; Planning Director

**SUBJECT:** ***Annual Progress Report – Garner Forward Comprehensive Plan***

**DATE:** November 26, 2019

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Garner Forward Comprehensive Plan and Transportation Plan Update were adopted on June 19, 2018. The process that produced the completely new comprehensive plan and an overhauled and updated transportation plan for Garner took about two (2) years to complete from the execution of the contract to final plan adoption. A recommendation within the plans is for staff to provide annual reports documenting progress on plan goals, objectives and tasks. As such, this is the first report covering the time period from approval through September 2019.

During the planning process, five (5) main categories of issues or were developed and subsequently refined by the Steering Committee and staff: Maintaining Character, Housing and Living Arrangements, Commercial Development, Recreational Opportunities and Transportation. Each of these five (5) topics has an associated vision – repeated in *italics* within this report – and several key objectives towards which progress is reported. Each objective must be framed within a larger context of guiding principles which are highlighted here.

Topic: Keeping Our Character – guided by the principles of:

- Balancing costs with revenues;
- Influencing design to keep with our character and improve value;
- Creating a healthy brand;
- Partnering with civic and other organizations, both public and private; and
- Including recommendations that help address school performance.

Topic: Living Spaces – guided by the principles of:

- Attracting young and old populations;
- Using design and location to create good multi-family places;
- Refocusing on our “centers”, including Downtown Garner and North Garner; and
- Anticipating a surge in redevelopment.

Topic: Working Places – guided by the principles of:

- Attracting unique commercial establishments;
- Aligning the development code with our desired ends;
- Supporting an anticipated increase in office needs;
- Taking advantage of work-in-place trends; and
- Understanding utility demands associated with development.

Topic: Recreation Opportunities – guided by the principles of:

- Identifying and investing in outdoor space;
- Connecting us internally with open space;
- Continuing to add indoor recreational space;
- Connecting us with the larger regional trail/greenway network; and
- Exploring public and private partnerships, including those with neighboring towns.

Topic: Keeping Us Moving – guided by the principles of:

- Increasing knowledge of all the techniques available to us;
- Using the full range of congestion management tools;
- Identifying projects with “bang for the buck” and new funding opportunities;
- Increasing the role of transit, while maximizing benefits of new technologies;
- Prioritizing and defending connectivity;
- Creating streets that include bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure;
- Celebrating our points of entry; and
- Managing 540 as an asset.

## II. PROGRESS – HIGHLIGHTED THEMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

**A. Keeping Our Character:** *Building on and conserving the existing character will help the Town attract quality development with favorable design qualities and amenities. That development can also build infrastructure to help ensure long-term financial viability in a “virtuous circle” of sustainable improvements. (development activity => more investment => development activity => more investment....)*

### 1. Recommendation – Establish a Regular Evaluation Among Peers

This recommendation is being assigned to the Planning Services section within the Planning Department. Recent departmental restructuring and training of new hires will be completed in the spring of 2020, at which time this task will be pursued in earnest, particularly since there is an identified index/tool for use.

## **2. Recommendation – Create a Support Network for Public Schools**

This recommendation requires a dedicated staff person who can devote 5-10 hours/week on a regular basis once such a network is established. Existing workloads within the Planning Department prevent anyone from taking this task on at this time; however, it should be noted that several departments such as Economic Development and Police do already partner with area schools on specific programs which may serve as a basis for this task in the future. Additionally, the Senior Planner – Transportation is beginning to look at ways to support schools that conduct or would like to conduct Bike and Walk to School days.

- B. Living Spaces:** *Housing for Garner’s citizens should continue to adapt to changing market influences and should specifically focus on location, quantity and design quality to drive how Garner will look in the future.*

### **1. Recommendation – Improve Design Outcomes with Form-Based Code**

This recommendation has been incorporated into a UDO re-write project that is being led by the Planning Department. As of November 2019, contract documents with Stewart, Inc. are being finalized with an anticipated start date in December or January. The project manager for staff has been identified as the Planning Director.

### **2. Recommendation – Establish Community Forums**

As written, this recommendation anticipated approximately 60 hours of staff time per year (20-30 per forum). As noted previously, current workloads and training of new hires makes this task challenging. However, discussions have occurred with the Public Information Office to see how they might assist in the coming year by providing assistance with disseminating news, incorporating Planning staff into their podcasts and pop-up Town Halls, etc.

### **3. Recommendation – Promote Multi-Family Housing in Select Areas**

Staff has successfully worked with developers to promote multi-family in existing designated zoning districts and areas identified on the future land use map. These include: the approved Pine Ridge Apartments on Pinewinds Drive, the planned Waterfield Ridge Apartments on S. Greenfield Pkwy, the planned Elevate at White Oak apartments on Salt Hill Dr. Improved compatibility issues between multi and single-family development have been incorporated into the previously mentioned UDO re-write project.

#### 4. Recommendation – Preserve and Protect Garner’s Existing Housing Stock

This recommendation will need to be re-structured as the Neighborhood Improvement Office has been discontinued. However, the Planning Department has absorbed some of the former program and is continuing to work with community organizations such as Rebuilding Together of the Triangle and Wake County. It is expected with the conclusion of probationary training for the Senior Planner for Zoning this coming spring, staff will be able to explore ways to re-tool this recommendation.

#### 5. Recommendation – Affordable Housing

The Town and Planning Department continue to be actively engaged in regional meetings surrounding this issue. Specifically, the Planning Services Section staff are designated as staff liaisons to the Wake County planner’s group for housing. Meanwhile, the UDO re-write project will consider regulatory impacts affecting the cost and design of housing.

- C. **Working Places:** *Commercial development should be a reflection of what we in the community of Garner need to have nearer to us, not only what the marketplace wants today. Recognizing changing trends in retail, workplace flexibility, and how work, home and fun can be integrated are important to creating great places within Garner.*

#### 1. Recommendation – Create One Co-Work Space

It should be noted that efforts in this area are better led by economic development staff who are able to function more as recruiters. In that vein, the Planning Department is currently working with the Downtown Development Manager to review and work through regulatory issues for a co-working space in Downtown Garner. The developer is finishing their due diligence with a formal submittal expected in the coming months.

#### 2. Recommendation – Establish a Cooking Studio/Farmer’s Market

It should again be noted that efforts in this area are better led by economic development staff who are able to function more as recruiters. Currently, the Downtown Development Manager works to hold pop-up markets several times a year. Planning staff have also fielded some recent citizen requests concerning how to hold temporary/seasonal markets. If successful, these temporary venues could develop into something more.

### 3. Recommendation – Develop the North

Private development proposals continue to come in for North Garner in the form of both single-family homes and townhomes (Avenues at White Oak, Vandora West, Creech Road Subdivision, Ashton Forest, etc.). Re-investment in Main Street is also occurring (Shady's, Full Bloom, Garner Recreation Center, etc.). The Downtown Garner Association is kicking off a collaborative effort to expand the Main Street business district to a "pad" between Full Bloom and the Garner Recreation Center. Proximity to downtown Raleigh and the small, quaint nature of downtown Garner are expected to continue attracting more investment in this area. Specific to Planning staff, the Senior Planner for Transportation continues to coordinate efforts with NCDOT to ensure that bridge replacements over US 70 at Benson and Vandora Springs roads will be walkable and inviting to pedestrians with betterment funds contributed by the Town.

### 4. Recommendation – Revisit and Revise Parking...Comprehensively

This recommendation has been incorporated into a UDO re-write project that is being led by the Planning Department. As of November 2019, contract documents with Stewart, Inc. are being finalized with an anticipated start date in December or January. The project manager for staff has been identified as the Planning Director.

- D. Recreation Opportunities:** *The recreation opportunities in Garner do more for our community than just provide a place to play: they signify our commitment to being a healthy place; increase property values through association with green space; and connect great places to great neighborhoods along scenic trails.*

### 1. Recommendation – Secure Open Space and Recreational Areas in the South of Town

The Town had already secured the Meadowbrook Golf Course property at the time of this plan's adoption. Planning staff continue to use the park land dedication requirement within the UDO to discuss future needs in the southern areas with potential developers. Following discussions with the Town Attorney, Planning staff are now implementing the Town's public greenway plan by formally recognizing these greenway corridors as public park land. Recent subdivision approvals along Mahler's Creek and Swift Creek include developer-funded construction of sections of public greenway that will serve their residents and link together over time for the benefit of the larger community.

## **2. Recommendation – Develop a Public Arts Program**

It should be noted that efforts in this area are better led by staff from the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department and would require significant time and effort. However, Planning staff continue to work with developers to incorporate small art elements where they can. Examples include gateway signage, the masonry relief panel on the side of the Chipotle restaurant space at White Oak and the mural on the side of Full Bloom downtown.

## **3. Recommendation – Invest in the Maintenance of Current Parks and Recreation Facilities and Increase Programming**

In the past year, the Public Works Department has been reconfigured to establish a separate Parks and Ground Division as well as specific work groups for both parks and athletic fields. Additional personnel have also been brought on board to fill out these teams. Specialized attention may now be devoted to both areas. Meanwhile, the Parks, Recreation & Cultural Resources Department filled a new position for Recreation Superintendent in anticipation of the opening of the Indoor Recreation Center set to open in January.

## **4. Recommendation – Preserve, Install and Maintain Street Trees**

This regulatory language supporting this recommendation has been incorporated into the UDO re-write project that is being led by the Planning Department. As of November 2019, contract documents with Stewart, Inc. are being finalized with an anticipated start date in December or January. The project manager for staff has been identified as the Planning Director. Key discussion points include tree placement, tree species selection and maintenance responsibility – all of which are significant. In the meantime, Planning Staff continue to enforce existing requirements for tree canopy preservation, buffers and street (yard) trees.

- E. Keeping Us Moving:** *The transportation system in Garner is crucial to more than just moving traffic: we must be able to move people and business products safely and efficiently. In places where we want to retain a sense of community, walking, biking, and public transportation may provide alternative ways of accessing nearby destinations.*

## **1. Recommendation – Strengthen Access Management**

This recommendation has been incorporated into the UDO re-write project that is being led by the Planning Department. As of November 2019, contract documents with Stewart, Inc. are being finalized with an anticipated start date in December or January. The project manager for staff has been identified as the Planning Director.

## **2. Recommendation – Establish a Connectivity Standard**

This recommendation has been incorporated into the UDO re-write project that is being led by the Planning Department. As of November 2019, contract documents with Stewart, Inc. are being finalized with an anticipated start date in December or January. The project manager for staff has been identified as the Planning Director.

## **3. Recommendation – Conduct Small-Area Plans**

To date, there have been no small area plans identified for budgeting. As noted, each plan would be expected to cost \$80,000 - \$100,000 depending on scale and complexity. However, Planning Staff were able to complete a short in-house study of traffic and roadway capacity in the Aversboro, Benson, Buffaloe and Timber corridors which had been identified as an area of concern. This study has been shared with boards and community groups.

## **4. Recommendation – Adopt a Complete Street Policy and Guidelines**

Initial efforts related to this recommendation have been incorporated into the UDO re-write project that is being led by the Planning Department. As of November 2019, contract documents with Stewart, Inc. are being finalized with an anticipated start date in December or January. The project manager for staff has been identified as the Planning Director.

### **III. PROGRESS – IMPACTS TO ROUTINE WORK**

#### **A. Impacting the Work of Town's Development Services Departments.**

##### **1. Staff Reports.**

The Planning Department routinely consults this document on at least a bi-monthly basis when producing staff reports and recommendations for the approval or denial of projects. Initially, quick tables were used to document whether or not a particular site or subdivision plan was in compliance with the Comprehensive Plan. Today, staff has re-vamped the report template to cite complete goal, objective or policy statements within the document related to the five (5) themes of the plan as well as the land use map.

##### **2. Required Background Materials.**

The Town has begun to undertake several planning efforts in the past year for which these plans are required background materials. These efforts include the re-write of the Unified Development Ordinance and the update of the Parks, Recreation & Cultural Resources Master Plan.

### 3. Pre-Development / Pre-Application Meetings.

The plans and land use map have been loaded in folders accessible to conference room touchscreen computer displays. The graphics, maps and text are routinely displayed as aids for furthering discussion and conversation regarding private development proposals. Currently, staff are conducting at least four (4) such meetings each and every week. Those meetings occurring in the plan's opportunity sites are documented in the following section.

- B. Opportunity Sites:** *The Garner Forward Steering Committee selected several locations that could substantially change over the life of the plan and create opportunities for excellence. Details of renderings are not important, but are used to suggest density, design and use. The renderings blend existing character with new elements inspired by viable economic and market trends.*

#### 1. Garner Station

This rendering is based ideas for redevelopment that are guiding Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) plans in this area.. Current planning efforts at GoRaleigh call for this specific corridor study to begin in January of 2020. GoRaleigh has already established a significant track record for planning these corridors through its recent efforts along New Bern Avenue which is slated first for BRT implementation.

#### 2. Northeast Gateway

The vision for this gateway is to both encourage the core industrial purpose of the area as well as entice visitors as a gateway to the rest of Garner. To date, Amazon is constructing a large distribution center and other interested parties have met with staff concerning adjacent lands. While the Amazon building is not immediately adjacent to the roadway, most parking is located to the side, the site is heavily landscaped and the architecture enhanced through the paint scheme, additional breaks of planes and stamped treatments of certain concrete panels.

#### 3. Auburn Station

The vision for this "station" area is guiding discussions for a possible park-and-ride facility for future commuter rail along with commercial and small office development. Environmental features, historic structures and the railroad call for context-sensitive review. To date, pre-development meetings in this area have included a bank and apartments.

#### 4. Fifth Avenue

Fifth Avenue has the potential to become a commercial center complementing historic Main Street. To date, there have been no discussions related to the public or private redevelopment of this area.

## **5. Downtown**

Downtown Garner is the location to promote our local flavor and flair. With public investments in a new Recreation Center and streetscape improvements, along with the possibility of a commuter rail stop, downtown has begun to see a leveraging of private investment in the renovation of several main street buildings and the arrival of small eating and drinking establishments. Planning staff continue to work closely with the Downtown Development Manager to coordinate the opportunities presenting themselves here.

## **C. Unanticipated Events/Occurrences**

### **1. Map Amendments.**

While staff was fully aware of the increase in the number of land use map amendments, it was not immediately clear as to just how many there would be in the first year. The parcel-by-parcel designation of future land uses provides less flexibility in interpreting the map; however, it does lead to more deliberate discussions regarding map amendments and decisions to expand or otherwise alter future land use recommendations in specific areas. A challenge is to educate stakeholders regarding this matter so as not to hinder these discussions solely based on the fact that an amendment is needed.

### **2. Retaining 2010 Garner Transportation Plan**

An update of the Town's Transportation Plan was added later in the scoping development process for the Garner Forward project. As such, it was anticipated to be an update as opposed to a complete overhaul. However, it was not until nearer the date of plan adoption when staff began to test run the application of this plan to various reports that the utilization of this plan revealed some deficiencies for which the 2010 Plan would still need to be actively referenced. While staff were able to consolidate some map elements from both documents, additional work remains to be completed.

#### IV. GOALS FOR NEXT REPORTING PERIOD

- Report on the progress made on a significant number of recommendations that have been incorporated into the scope of work for the re-write of the Unified Development Ordinance.
- Complete evaluation of existing tool(s) made available from AARP to establish a means of evaluating ourselves against our peers.
- Monitor progress of partnership to expand retail/restaurant space in Downtown.
- Continue to place emphasis on private proposals within opportunity sites and sharing visionary plan information as soon as possible.
- Continued progress on consolidating relevant 2010 Garner Transportation Plan recommendations with the Garner Forward Transportation Plan.
- Expand annual report to include progress on the detailed lists of practices or policies to be explored and/or implemented and any of the other recommendations found on pages 94-98 of the plan that are not highlighted in the preceding chapters.
- Identify working group outside of TRC to assist in monitoring and annual reporting.